

# Veterans' Report

Information for South Dakota Veterans

Fall 2003



## Veterans in Congress Speak Out

Dear Friend,

Days after President Bush requested \$87 billion in new funding for Iraq, I joined 23 other military veterans in Congress in sending a letter to the President.

"We stand behind our troops 100 percent," the letter said. "The stakes for our troops and our national security are too high for us to fail."

The letter also highlighted the important needs, too often unmet, of veterans and military families: "America's soldiers are fighting for our freedom overseas. They and their families shouldn't have to fight the government to receive the benefits they deserve."

After sending the letter, we backed up our words with action.

When the Iraq funding bill came to the Senate floor in October, we built bipartisan coalitions to support two key amendments. The first amendment would allow Guard members without employer health insurance to pay a premium and participate in TRICARE, the military health system. The second amendment would provide the VA health system with adequate funding, so that thousands of veterans would not be charged a membership fee or turned away from hospitals and clinics.

Both these amendments were adopted by the Senate, but only one survived the conference committee negotiations between the Senate and House of Representatives. Unfortunately, the President strongly opposed both amendments. He said they were unrelated to Iraq.

In my view, that perspective is shortsighted, and it blocks progress on many important issues affecting veterans, military retirees, and reservists.

We know that more than 100,000 Iraq veterans will need VA health care when they return home and leave the military. We know the annual casualty rate in Iraq is now about 3,400, and these men and women will turn to the VA for continuing treatment once they leave the military. How can we care for these veterans if we are already turning away veterans from World War II and Korea and Vietnam?

We know that thousands of Guard members will be serving in Iraq for years to come. Who will serve in Iraq if people refuse to enlist and re-enlist in the National Guard and reserves?

The good news is that many senators, without regard to party affiliation, share my view that this nation needs to do more for veterans and military personnel. Thanks to the determination of a bipartisan group of senators, we have made good progress this fall on concurrent receipt and health care for Guard members.

I hope you'll stand with us in this fight to honor and assist those who serve. This year in particular, please take a moment on November 11 to remember our veterans. And if you have suggestions or concerns, please don't hesitate to call or write to me.



*Senator Daschle remembers Korean War veterans. See story, p. 4*

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# Improving VA Health Care

With a new generation of veterans returning home from Iraq, this is a good time to ask whether the government is meeting its obligations to those who have served. In my view, it is not.

Veterans today face lengthy waiting lists at clinics and hospitals. They face red tape, especially when visiting the VA for prescription drugs. Remarkably, some in Washington are now proposing that veterans pay a \$250 annual membership fee to remain eligible for VA health care.

I'm working hard to improve our treatment of veterans and would like to share a few recent developments.

Earlier this fall, I contacted VA Secretary Anthony Principi and urged him to eliminate the red tape that blocks many veterans from receiving affordable prescription drugs.

Under current VA policies, VA pharmacies won't accept prescriptions written by private doctors. They will only accept prescriptions written by VA doctors.

In many cases, this means veterans visit two doctors before filling their prescriptions. For instance, if you go to a private doctor and are prescribed heart medication, the VA won't provide anything until you see a VA doctor.

Not only does this practice waste up to \$1 billion each year, it also places thousands of veterans on lengthy waiting lists, keeping them from convenient access to needed medications.

Earlier this year, I introduced a bill (S.19) to eliminate this requirement. But the Justice Department recently informed Secretary Principi that a legislative solution is not necessary – the Secretary can change this policy himself. Secretary Principi issued a rule this summer to temporarily waive the rule for a small group of veterans, so I have asked him to use the same authority to help all veterans.

Second, you should know about growing support for an idea I have supported to improve veterans' health care funding. This spring, a presidential task force recommended that funding for VA health care programs be taken out of the yearly Congressional appropriations process. Instead, it would be funded like Medicare or Medicaid, based on the number of people who need care. Senator Johnson and I have both introduced legislation to enact this plan.

The time has surely come to make this change. Ronald Conley, the immediate past commander of the American Legion, said, "I am now convinced that anything less than a mandatory funding model is a guarantee that veterans, their service organizations, congressional committees and VA officials will continue visiting and revisiting this issue until they realize that 30-percent increases in demand cannot be served by 7-percent increases of funds."

President Bush's 2004 budget is a prime example of the problems with the current process. For the past nine months, veterans organizations have been fighting relentlessly to hold off the President's proposals to require a \$250 annual membership fee for middle-income veterans, as well as higher copayments for medications and treatment.

Right now, it looks like veterans and their allies may win this fight, but it has taken enormous time and energy. These efforts could have been better spent improving services to veterans, not merely defending what already exists.



*Senator Daschle meets with South Dakota American Legion leaders.*

# Ensuring Quality Health Care for Reservists

We must make certain our troops are healthy and ready when called to duty. For National Guard and reserve troops, that means regular medical care and assessments, even when they are not on active duty. Today, according to the General Accounting Office, there are serious gaps in health readiness for many Guard and reserve troops.

The root of the problem is lack of health insurance. Up to 20 percent of all National Guard and Reserve soldiers, including 40 percent of junior enlisted personnel, are uninsured. As a result, some units experienced delays when called up for Iraq, while military officials tracked down medical records or conducted routine physicals. Earlier this year, I introduced a bill (S.852) that would guarantee all reservists access to health care by allowing them to enroll in TRICARE, the military's health care plan. I later joined with Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC), an Air Force reservist, to offer a similar amendment to the defense authorization bill. The Daschle-Graham amendment passed 85-10, with solid bipartisan support. Unfortunately, the defense bill has been held up in conference committee, and our amendment was facing determined opposition from the White House and House of Representatives.

When the Pentagon announced extended Iraq tours for reservists, followed quickly by President Bush's announcement that he would seek \$87 billion for Iraq, Senator Graham and I chose another strategy. We asked the Senate to add reservist health care as an amendment to the President's supplemental appropriations request. On October 2, the Senate approved our amendment by a voice vote. Although we faced continued strong White House opposition (see front page), the plan is about to become law.

In its current form, the plan would allow reservists to join TRICARE if they are ineligible for employer health coverage. Participants would be required to pay a modest annual premium, but otherwise would receive the same coverage as active-duty troops and dependents. The amendment is written to expire after one year, but I am confident that next year we can make it permanent.

The South Dakota National Guard, the National Guard Association, and the National Guard Enlisted Association worked with me in developing this proposal, and they have been outstanding allies throughout the legislative process.

Nearly 160,000 reservists are currently serving on active duty. Many of these are on the front lines of our efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Others are working to bolster our homeland security. Still others are helping with natural disasters, like the California forest fires. Their work is more important than ever, and I am very proud of their service. While I think providing health insurance to reservists who lack employer health care is an important first step, I will continue working to open this benefit to all reservists.



*Sign posted at Baghdad International Airport by South Dakota Guard Unit.*

## Keeping B-1 Bombers Flying

A few months before the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Defense Department decided to retire one-third of the B-1 bomber fleet, judging it to be of diminishing importance to the Air Force. However, the outstanding performance of the B-1 in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated that this plane remains essential. In those battles, the B-1 struck with a degree of precision never before achieved by any plane, in any war. It has proven critical to victory on the ground and helped reduce U.S. casualties.

In May, the Senate passed an amendment, which I introduced, that will provide funding to halt the B-1 retirement program. This fall, that funding was signed into law.

This is an important victory for the Air Force and the strength of American air power. It is also a victory for the Ellsworth community. Our success in bolstering the B-1 fleet is a sign that Ellsworth will remain vital to the U.S. Air Force for years to come.



# Honoring Korean War Veterans

This summer, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the armistice ending the Korean War. In appreciation of the valor and selfless sacrifice demonstrated by those who fought this war, I was proud to introduce a bipartisan resolution (Senate Concurrent Resolution 72) commemorating this important anniversary. The Senate passed this resolution with unanimous support.

Currently, about 12,000 veterans of the conflict live in South Dakota. They are now among the elder statesmen of our country's long lineage of heroism, true role models to our youth, and an inspiration to those soldiers now fighting around the world against terrorism and brutal dictatorship.

While we sometimes take our way of life for granted, Korean War veterans remind us that, as their Korean War Commemoration Flag proclaims, "Freedom is not free." Without the dedicated service and sacrifice of the soldiers we celebrate in this, the Year of the Korean Veteran, our nation would not be able to enjoy the freedom and prosperity that we too often take for granted. So, on behalf of all the citizens of South Dakota, thank you for your lasting contribution to our nation's greatness. You are true heroes.

For more information about S. Con. Res. 72, or to view a copy of the legislation, please visit my website at: <http://www.daschle.senate.gov/troops.html>

## Working Toward Full Concurrent Receipt

For more than a decade, I've been working to end the unfair law that prohibits veterans from receiving both military retirement and VA disability benefits at the same time. This old law, which has become known as the "disabled veterans tax," reduces a military retiree's pension by one dollar for every dollar that veteran receives in disability compensation.

It's unfair, and it needs to be changed.

For the past four years, the Senate has passed legislation authorizing full concurrent receipt of both benefits. Last year, after the Senate passed this law, the White House and House of Representatives created a compromise plan for certain veterans with combat-related disabilities, known as "Combat Related Special Compensation," or CRSC.

This year, House Republicans and the White House again resisted the call for full concurrent receipt. Instead, they submitted a plan to dismantle much of the VA disability program.

The agreement would have cut roughly two-thirds of all veterans out of the VA's disability program, depriving them of compensation and access to benefits like prioritized health care. I was outraged by this proposal and joined Senator Harry Reid in notifying President Bush that we would never allow such a plan to pass the Senate.

Fortunately, the President has abandoned that idea. He is now offering a compromise to significantly expand last year's CRSC program, thus ending the disabled veterans tax for thousands of veterans. If passed, the proposal would phase in full concurrent receipt for military retirees with a disability rating of 50 percent or above, expand CRSC to cover all disabled retirees, and extend CRSC to Guard and Reserve retirees for the first time.

This proposal still must be presented to the Senate and House of Representatives for a vote, which I believe will happen in November. Even if it passes, however, it is not the end. I will not stop working until our final goal – full concurrent receipt for all disabled veterans – is realized.

*I need your input. Please contact me with your thoughts on veterans and military issues.*

## Contact Tom Daschle

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